

Native Americans obtained horses much earlier than previously believed

By BOB SILBERNAGEL

Among members of the Comanche Nation, oral history passed from generation to generation tells that “Our people had horses before we ever met the Spanish,” said Jimmy Arterberry, a Comanche tribal historian and former tribal administrator.

But that oral history is at odds with long-established narratives developed by Euro-American scholars. Those narratives say the Comanches and most other Native American tribes obtained horses only after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when Spanish colonists were driven out of New Mexico for a dozen years, leaving thousands of horses behind.

According to that version of history, horses were then dispersed slowly from Pueblo Indians in New Mexico to other Natives in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains.

However, new research led by William Taylor, curator of archaeology at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History, indicates a much earlier timeframe for the dispersal of horses in the West – beginning between 1519 and 1600, with a median date of about 1550.

Moreover, the study published in March in the journal *Science*, shows that horses moved across the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains via Native American trade networks, well before European explorers and colonists arrived in the region.

The study, with 87 co-authors from around the world, includes many Native Americans such as Arterberry. It is based on the re-examination of 33 specimens of horse remains held in museums, using radiocarbon dating and DNA testing.

“We identified three horses from North American Indigenous contexts conclusively predating the Pueblo Revolt,” said the report.

“It’s a pretty significant shift,” Taylor told me in a telephone interview. It indicates that the development of horse culture among Plains Indians and those living in the Rocky Mountains wasn’t driven by contact with Europeans. Instead, it spread organically among Native groups. Some Natives were breeding horses, managing herds and trading horses with other groups long before European contact.

Equally important, Taylor said, the study suggests that “Archaeology is catching up with oral history” such as that recounted by Arterberry. “I don’t think science and oral history are opposed to each other.”

For Arterberry, “One of the most fascinating things for me [about the study] was how the DNA testing aligned with our oral history.”

“We don’t need science to confirm our histories,” he stated. Those histories were told and retold in winter encampments over centuries by designated story tellers.

However, the results of the horse study help overcome long-held objections from many scholars that claim tribal oral histories are “hearsay” or “unreliable,” Arterberry said. “In this case, we get to reaffirm with science what the stories of our people have been saying.”

The three pre-Pueblo Revolt specimens tested by Taylor and his partners came from different areas of the West: Southwestern Wyoming, the Kaw River of northeastern Kansas and a Pueblo in northern New Mexico. Another specimen from Idaho seems to fit the same pattern. All showed evidence of human care, management, and use in transportation, such as wear patterns on skulls or jaws indicating the use of ropes, halters and bits.

Radiocarbon dating of the specimen from Paa'ko Pueblo in northern New Mexico demonstrates that horses reached that region prior to Spanish colonization of the American Southwest, which began with the first Spanish settlements at Santa Fe and Taos.

Wild horses, which may have been abandoned by or escaped from early Spanish expeditions such as Cortez's conquest of Mexico in 1519 and Coronado's expedition through the American Southwest in 1540, were likely captured, then became the basis of Native American domestic horse herds.

Some Comanche bands obtained their first horses directly from these wild horse herds, Arterberry said. Others got them by trading with Apaches and Utes, who had obtained them first.

A second specimen that pre-dated the Pueblo Revolt is the skeleton of a foal that lived and died around 1650 in the Blacks Fork region of southwestern Wyoming. That area is the historic home of the Comanche people, who later separated from their Shoshone and Ute relatives and migrated southeast over many decades.

The foal skeleton shows that it had suffered a head injury, but had been treated for that injury. Isotope analysis of the horse's diet also showed that the foal was born and raised in Wyoming, not brought north from New Mexico, demonstrating there was a horse-raising culture in lands inhabited by Comanches and Shoshones decades before the Pueblo Revolt.

The discovery contradicts a 1724 European written observation that the Comanche obtained horses only by "barter," and "had not yet been able to raise any colts," Taylor noted. And it highlights the fact that when Comanches began migrating to the southeast, probably in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, they already had some horses.

Additionally, evidence that the foal was buried in a ritual ceremony indicates that the people of the region already had a strong reverence for horses.

In addition to Arterberry, Native Americans from a variety of tribes, including the Lakota, co-authored parts of the study of early horses. And like the Comanches, the Lakota's oral history tells of their ancestors acquiring horses before the first Europeans arrived in their homelands.

Taylor and his fellow researchers believe the primary reason that previous scholars focused on the Pueblo Revolt as the beginning for horse dispersal in the West is because they relied almost exclusively on accounts written by Europeans.

Those written reports were biased by European views of the world. But more important was the fact that those documents were limited geographically to places where European colonists and explorers had visited. There was no written record of what was occurring in most of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains until the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Taylor, who grew up in Montana, has long been fascinated by the interaction between horses and humans.

Some of his research in this regard began in Mongolia, where he and others began developing a range of tools for looking at how horses were used for transportation.

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An Eastern Band Cherokee elder with one of her traditional horses.

SACRED WAY SANCTUARY/ Special to the Sentinel



Three-dimensional model of horse skull outfitted with a replica rawhide rope bridle, similar to those used by many Native horse riders.

WILLIAM T. TAYLOR/ Special to the Sentinel



Horse and rider petroglyph at the Tolar site in southwestern Wyoming, likely carved by ancestral Comanche or Shoshone people.

PAT DOAK/ Special to the Sentinel



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In the United States, he said, “I’ve been fortunate to work with many Native people.”

In addition to showing when Natives began to acquire horses, the study also proved that the first horses obtained by Native Americans were primarily of Iberian origin, which makes sense if they descended from horses brought to the New World by Spanish conquistadors. One later specimen found in Kentucky showed ancestry from English bloodlines.

There was no indication from any of the specimens examined that they were descendants of Viking horses which were brought to northeastern Canada centuries before the Spanish, French and English began to colonize the Western Hemisphere. Nor was there any significant link found with Pleistocene Era horses, which lived on this continent long before Europeans arrived, but are believed to have become extinct here about 10,000 years ago.

Sources: Author interviews with Jimmy Arterberry and William Taylor; “Early dispersal of domestic horses into the Great Plains and northern Rockies,” by William Taylor and 87 others, in the journal *Science*, March 2023; “Archaeology and genomics, together with Indigenous knowledge, revise the human-horse story in the American West,” by Yvette Running Horse Collin and William Taylor, *The Conversation* online academic journal, March 30, 2023.

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Lakota archaeologist Chance Ward examines horse remains in the Archaeozoology Laboratory at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

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